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**Bridging Cultures to Form a Nation:
Difference, Community, and Democratic Thinking**

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**Association of American Colleges and Universities &
The Democracy Commitment**

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Overview/Rationale for the Initiative

In 2012 the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) and The Democracy Commitment (TDC) received a \$359,995 grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to support a three-year faculty and curriculum development project, *Bridging Cultures to Form a Nation: Difference, Community, and Democratic Thinking* (hereafter *Bridging Cultures*). The project had four broad goals:

- to infuse questions about difference, community, and democratic thinking into humanities courses;
- to promote greater adoption of proven high-impact practices;
- to create over a 3-year period a series of humanities-enriched professional development opportunities to community college faculty, especially adjunct faculty; and
- to involve an ever-expanding circle of faculty and other key groups on the project campuses, through collaboration with sister community colleges, and through partnerships with State Humanities Councils.

AAC&U and TDC proposed this project in response to several troubling trends in higher education and society more generally. In colleges and universities, there is increased emphasis on work preparation in higher education at the expense of other goals, such as responsible citizenship and personal development, too often accompanied by neglect or denigration of study in the humanities. As American society becomes more polarized politically and as demographic changes make understanding diversity and difference increasingly important, study in the humanities and a liberal education generally are needed now more than ever. These needs are especially pronounced at community colleges, whose mission was envisioned as serving their local communities and where the majority of students are now enrolled and whose population reflects the emerging “new majority” in America.

Through faculty development and curricular change, *Bridging Cultures* aimed to make the development of critical democratic capacities—democratic thinking, empathetic understanding, and responsible engagement—central to introductory humanities courses at community colleges. Specifically, the grant proposal anticipated “concentric circles of work” beginning with core faculty at each of ten community colleges who would, through an AAC&U summer institute, form a team that would develop plans to promote changes on their campuses and outreach to other institutions and in their states.

Chronology 2012-2015:

In April 2012 AAC&U selected ten geographically and demographically varied community colleges to participate in *Bridging Cultures*: Chandler-Gilbert Community College (AZ); County College of Morris (NJ); Georgia Perimeter College (now part of

Georgia State University, GA); Kapi'olani Community College (HI); Kingsborough Community College, City University of New York (NY); Lone Star College-Kingwood (TX); Miami Dade College (FL); Middlesex Community College (MA); Mount Wachusett Community College (MA); and Santa Fe College (FL). The project began with a five-day institute at the University of Vermont in July 2012 at which project teams worked with eight faculty members and administrators who gave talks, facilitated reading groups, and worked with teams from the ten institutions in developing their plans for the initiative.

During the 2012-2013 academic year, the teams began to work on their campuses, doing faculty development work anticipating changes in curriculum, pedagogy, and program that would promote greater attention to issues of democracy and difference, especially in introductory courses in the humanities.

Not surprisingly, in almost every instance the teams worked on some existing course, program, or group as the initial focus of their work. For example, Georgia Perimeter's team focused on its common reading program as a way to organize and integrate a variety of introductory courses, and Mount Wachusett explored ways to work on veterans' issues, reflecting their population. They also began their own faculty development efforts both on their own campuses and with other institutions. During that year AAC&U also launched a webinar series as part of the project that covered a range of topics from service learning to flipped classrooms to the history of immigration.

The institutions made rapid progress during the 2013-14 academic year. Faculty development activities continued and expanded; there were significant changes to courses and in pedagogy, often involving a large number of courses, and there were numerous outreach efforts ranging from service learning and community forums to scholarly presentations on the initiative.

Anticipating the January 2015 end of the grant, AAC&U and TDC decided to have the *Bridging Cultures* institutions present their work at the annual TDC meeting in Louisville Kentucky in June 2014. There was a pre-conference symposium/project meeting devoted to the initiative with each institution reporting its results, and there were also panels in which *Bridging Cultures* institutions offered a more in-depth, focused presentation of their work .

Since there were unexpended funds at the end of the grant award period, the institutions agreed to meet again at the 2015 TDC meeting in New Orleans to discuss how the activities started in the grant might be sustained. The primary activity at the New Orleans meeting was a luncheon with NEH Chair Bro Adams in which seven of the institutions discussed their activities under the grant, and Chairman Adams described his vision for the NEH. The very positive outcome of that meeting was an agreement within the group to work with to put forth a new proposal to NEH under its new Humanities in the Public Square initiative.

That proposal, *Citizenship Under Siege*, was accepted, and the participating institutions, all of whom were part of the original *Bridging Cultures* project, are actively working to host public forums that bring many of the issues and ideas developed under *Bridging Cultures* into institutions' local communities. Launching this new initiative provides a very appropriate combination of completing and continuing the impressive work under the grant.

Activities and Results of *Bridging Cultures*:

There were three major, overlapping categories of activities under the grant—faculty development, curricular and pedagogical change, and community outreach/civic engagement. The ten schools developed an interesting array of work in these categories and combined them in different ways. Overall, the results reflect significant change in the way in which these ten institutions approach issues of difference and democracy.

Faculty Development:

The changes envisioned by the grant needed to be developed and driven by faculty members. Revising courses, curricula, and programs; revisiting pedagogical strategy; and creating opportunities for implementation and engagement all depend on faculty members committing to the program. The 2012 institute described above was the initial faculty development activity designed to jumpstart the program. The faculty teams in turn continued their own development after returning to their campuses and worked with other faculty and institutions as well.

Faculty development took several forms across the institutions. Some simply took the summer institute model or some variant and applied it at their institution and in other settings. For example, Chandler-Gilbert sponsored a summer institute in 2013 for its faculty and invited colleagues from the other colleges in the Maricopa Community College District to participate as well. Among the outcomes of this institute was Mesa Community College, not one of the ten project institutions, launching its own *Bridging Cultures* initiative. Similarly, Middlesex developed a preconference workshop at the Massachusetts state-wide teaching and learning conference that described the *Bridging Cultures* project and the work of the ten institutions, providing material that other institutions could use in rethinking their own programs.

Much, if not most, of the faculty development work in the *Bridging Cultures* work was local and carried out through presentations and workshops on the campuses, leading to significant expansion of the number of courses addressing the issues raised in *Bridging Cultures*. For example, Kingsborough held meetings every semester for faculty to present their work, “to share their successes and struggles in pedagogical techniques and . . . perfect their syllabi.” The Miami Dade team created workshops on “Preparing Students for Civic Life” for three of its constituent campuses, as well for two nearby

colleges. This suggests the transferability of *Bridging Cultures* work to four-year institutions and that faculty development is potentially transportable and scalable given the right time, space, and materials.

There are many other formal and informal modes of faculty development among the institutions. The four departments that formed Georgia-Perimeter's created a reading group "sharing materials, ideas, projects . . . across the four disciplines." A similar interdisciplinary learning community was developed at Kapi 'olani with a specific focus on "Understanding of and appreciation for the unique history and cultural beliefs of Hawaii's native people." This kind of interdisciplinary group work was common in the project. Another, somewhat different approach was adopted by the County College of Morris involving faculty course portfolios in which faculty members displayed and discussed curricular changes and their effectiveness. Each of the institutions created some form of faculty development programs and opportunities, and most of the ten included outreach to other institutions.

These faculty development efforts and their results are almost certainly sustainable; the institutions' activities have ensured continuation of the work of the project. For example, Kingsborough's ongoing faculty conversation workshops and presentations about faculty development were so successful that they have been able to expand the number of *Bridging Cultures*-connected courses to nearly 100, and the work is now deeply rooted across the curriculum. Similarly, the Miami-Dade College created 26 Classroom Assessment Technique examples for *Bridging Cultures* courses to encourage evaluation and success, which in turn led to 28 more examples being generated by faculty who had attended workshops on these techniques and examples. The *Bridging Cultures* work is thus now embedded in the ongoing practice of assessment at Miami-Dade.

Curricular and Pedagogical Change:

The heart of the *Bridging Cultures* initiative was curricular change, which almost inevitably also involved revisiting pedagogical techniques. At each of the institutions introductory courses were revised, and new ones were often created to address issues of diversity and democracy. A good example is Lone Star-Kingwood naming and targeting "*Bridging Cultures*" courses, including developmental reading and writing courses, that "all incorporated reading and writing assignments requiring students to think in new ways about people they thought of as 'others.'" Santa Fe similarly targeted six courses that were critical for transfer for general education credit at the University of Florida, their primary transfer partner, as well as developing an *Bridging Cultures*-themed, interdisciplinary equivalent to a course on "What is a Good Life" required at the university.

Many of these course/curricular changes were connected to or nested in broader curricular and program initiatives. For example, at Georgia Perimeter the targeted

Bridging Cultures course also included work in their common reading program, “GPC Reads.” At Chandler-Gilbert *Bridging Cultures* themes were integral to a broader First Year Experience program that included curricular work linked to co-curricular programming—a common combination among *Bridging Culture* schools. The Chandler Gilbert courses were also designed with transfer to Arizona State University in mind. In every case, the *Bridging Cultures* team modified or created a suite of basic courses across the curriculum that would assure that all students would be exposed to *Bridging Cultures* themes from different disciplinary angles—for example, the team at Mount Wachusett’s courses included photography, computer design, English/Sociology, Mass Media, and Critical Thinking.

The combination of faculty development and curricular change necessarily led to ongoing consideration of pedagogical strategy. Miami Dade’s use of classroom assessment is a good example of a focus on pedagogy. Another good example is Middlesex’s Faculty Development seminar that “encouraged faculty to use a range of pedagogies appropriate to their subject matter and learning outcomes, but we provided support for arts-based pedagogies, service-learning, civic engagement, media rich projects, student led learning, undergraduate research, and use of LEAP VALUE Rubrics for assessment.” There are examples of each of these pedagogies—including “media rich” work at Mount Wachusett, service work and civic engagement at Lone Star, student art projects on the Holocaust at Miami-Dade—across the *Bridging Cultures* schools.

The range and variety of curricular and pedagogical change has involved constant movement toward high impact practices. Each institution has implicitly or explicitly developed curricula and pedagogies that involve high impact practices that have been documented as being associated with student growth and learning, as well as with narrowing achievement gaps for traditionally underserved student groups. The discussion in the institutions’ reports point to more active, engaged student work and the use, even if not explicitly named, of high impact practices. From first year experiences to active engagement in project-based learning to civic and service learning, the *Bridging Cultures* institutions have through this initiative all increased the number and quality of high impact practices on their campuses.

Community Outreach/Civic Engagement

Bridging Culture envisioned “concentric circles of work” that included publications, work with other institutions, and involvement in local communities through service learning and civic engagement.

Many participants in *Bridging Cultures* initiative wrote articles and did presentations about their work. For example, Jill Schennum and her colleagues at County College of Morris gave several presentations on the project, including at the annual AAC&U meeting, a meeting of the Eastern Sociological Society, and at the New Jersey Council

for the Humanities faculty forum in 2014. Faculty members from Kingsborough gave similar presentations at AAC&U, League for Innovations, and New England Political Science Association meetings.

Most of the institutions in *Bridging Culture* have worked at becoming a hub for other community colleges in their respective areas, including supporting faculty and program development. As mentioned previously, Chandler-Gilbert used the institute model to work with other schools in the Maricopa Community Colleges District. Middlesex partnered with Northern Essex and North Shore Community Colleges in their region and provided a workshop at a state wide conference on teaching and learning for other institutions. Mount Wachusett has developed a similar “hub” with four schools, and Santa Fe also established “partner schools” and did a presentation at the Association of Florida Colleges.

Perhaps the most common forms of community outreach involved service learning and civic engagement projects. At Georgia Perimeter College students were involved in clean up days in the community and English language tutoring for immigrants at local high schools as part of their *Bridging Cultures* courses. Service learning was similarly a major component of courses in Ethics and Humanities at Santa Fe. In almost every case, the *Bridging Cultures* initiative connected with the Student Affairs division or other groups on campus to cooperate on projects serving local and other communities; a good example is an Alternative Spring Break trip to El Paso sponsored by the Lone Star Center for Civic Engagement “to perform service and learn about the challenges facing people on both sides of the border.”

Among the *Bridging Cultures* schools there were many examples of civic engagement and ongoing projects involving community groups and organizations. For example, at Middlesex, one art course in the *Bridging Cultures* project involved the discovery and rehabilitation of a kiln in the local Cambodian community that will now become a regular point not only for instruction but engagement with that community. At Chandler-Gilbert, the *Bridging Cultures* project has worked with their Environmental Technology Center on an annual Unnatural Disaster Day forum on “community projects related to sustainability.” At Santa Fe, the immigration focus of *Bridging Cultures* led to students lobbying as part of a successful effort to have undocumented immigrants receive in state tuition. There are and will continue to be interwoven combinations service learning and civic engagement at the *Bridging Cultures* institutions.

Success, Sustainability, Continuation:

The activities discussed above barely scratch the surface of all that has been done under the grant—and in a relatively short span of time. The numbers are eye popping. Hundreds of courses were created or modified, hundreds of faculty were engaged in faculty development, and thousands of students were reached by *Bridging Cultures* courses and activities. To note just a few of the numbers: each institution has reported

somewhere between 15 and 100 courses revised or created under the *Bridging Cultures* grant, and that perhaps understates faculty involvement through course modifications inspired by the grant. For example, Lone Star-Kingwood reports “involving up to 50 faculty and thousands of students each semester,” and Georgia Perimeter’s numbers are 81 faculty and 852 students. With respect to students, Miami-Dade reports reaching 3,231 students, Middlesex more than 1,700, County College of Morris 1,100. And these numbers are only from the participating institutions, they do reflect what the other institutions that worked with the *Bridging Cultures* schools did in their curricula and programs.

These numbers mainly apply to curricular work. There are many more students and faculty, and community members and groups involved in a variety of ways in the initiative. The dozens, perhaps more than a hundred, talks and presentations connected with the grant are another way that the project has affected campuses and scholarly and local communities. The numbers of faculty involved in faculty development efforts is also impressive. County College of Morris reports 335 faculty members; similar outreach occurred at several other institutions, especially when one counts both on campus work and that in community college districts, such as Maricopa and Lone Star, and state wide offerings, such as at Middlesex. Finally, the various service learning and civic engagement efforts have also involved hundreds of faculty and thousands of students, and, equally important, many residents of the local communities these institutions serve.

Bridging Cultures has been a resounding success, having a significant impact on these ten institutions, their communities, and other community colleges. The goals have the project have all been met: numerous courses have been revised or created to focus on themes of difference, community, and democratic thinking. These curricular changes have been accompanied and enhanced by considerable work on faculty development and increased use of high impact practices. There have been substantial outreach efforts on the campuses, to other institutions, and in a variety of local and other communities. The institutions have made deep, sustainable changes across all these dimensions.

The *Bridging Cultures* initiative has led to another NEH-supported project, under the Humanities in the Public Square initiative, more directly focused on community engagement and outreach. AAC&U and TDC “are joining with seven community colleges [all participants in the *Bridging Cultures* initiative] to orchestrate a series of public forums at eight separate sites.” “Organized under the common theme, *Citizenship Under Siege*, the events are framed through the powerful historic, ethical, and narrative lenses of the humanities,” and address many of the same questions that were central to the *Bridging Cultures* initiative.

These institutions and others both within and beyond the *Bridging Cultures* group will be able to reach out to their communities with confidence because of the *Bridging*

Cultures grant. Equally important, the course and curricular changes as well as many of the new and modified community programs are like to continue and have the positive impact they have had so far. *Bridging Cultures* has had a significant positive impact in a relatively short time, and we can be confident it will continue to do so in the future. As Caryn Musil, the principal investigator under the new grant, put it in her article about *Bridging Cultures*, "Over the three years of the Bridging Cultures project the ever expanding numbers of faculty involved affirmed a . . . power to be citizens at their community colleges, making the institution more responsive to the needs of their students, their local communities, the nation, and the globe."¹

¹ Caryn McTighe Musil. 2016. "Bridging Cultures to Form a Nation: The Humanities and Democratic Learning." *New Directions for Community Colleges* 173 (1): 83-91.